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A

LETTER

TO THE

BOSTON ASSOCIATION

OF

CONGREGATIONAL MINISTERS,

TOUCHING CERTAIN MATTERS OF THEIR THEOLOGY.

BY THEODORE PARKER,

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LETTER.

GENTLEMEN :

The peculiar circumstances of the last few years have placed both you and me in new relations to the public, and to one another. Your recent actions constrain me to write you this public letter that all may the more fully understand the matter at issue between us, and the course you design to pursue. You are a portion of the Unitarian body, and your opinions and conduct will no doubt have some influence upon that body. You have, I am told, at great length, and in several consecutive meetings discussed the subject of my connection with your reverend body ; you have debated the matter whether you should expel me for heresy, and by a circuitous movement, recently made, have actually excluded me from preaching the Thursday Lecture. I do not call in question your motives, for it is not my office to judge you, neither do I now complain of your conduct, public or private, towards me during the last three years. That has been various. Some members of your association have uniformly treated me with the courtesy common amongst gentlemen ; some also with the civilities that are usual amongst ministers of the same denomination. Towards some of your number I entertain an affectionate gratitude for the good words I have heard from their lips in

my youth. I feel a great regard for some of you, on account of their noble and Christian characters, virtuous, self-denying, pious and without bigotry. I cherish no unkind feelings towards the rest of you ; towards none of you do I feel ill-will on account of what has past. I have treated my opponents with a forbearance which, I think has not always been sufficiently appreciated by such as have had the chief benefit of that forbearance. However, I hope never to be driven either by abuse from an opponent, or by the treachery of a pretended friend, to depart from the course of forbearance which I have hitherto, and uniformly, pursued.

But since you have, practically, taken so decided a stand, and have so frequently discussed me and my affairs among yourselves, and have at last made your movement, I think it important that the public should have a distinct knowledge of your theological position. I am searching for Truth, however humbly, and I suppose that you are as desirous of imparting to others as of receiving it from Heaven ; therefore I shall proceed to ask you certain questions, a good deal talked of at the present day, to which I venture to ask a distinct and categorical reply. But, by way of preliminary, I will first refresh your memory with a few facts.

Until recently the Unitarians have been supposed to form the advance-guard, so to say, of the church militant ; at least they have actually been the *Movement party in Theology*. It may hurt the feelings of some men, now, to confess it, but I think it is true. As such, the Unitarians have done a great work. As I understand the matter, this work was in part *intellectual* — for they really advanced theological

science both negatively, by the exposure of errors, and positively by the establishment of truths ;—but in greater part *moral*, for they declared either directly, or by implication, the right of each man to investigate for himself in matters pertaining to Religion, and his right also to the Christian name if he claimed it, and by his character seemed to deserve it. They called themselves “ liberal ” Christians, and seemed to consider that he was the best Christian who was most like Christ in character and life, thus making Religion the essential of Christianity, and leaving each man to determine his own Theology. They began their history by a denial of the Trinity, a doctrine very dear to the Christian Church, of very ancient standing therein, common alike to Catholics and Protestants, — a doctrine for centuries regarded as essential to the Christian scheme, the fundamental dogma of Christianity. For this denial they encountered the usual fate of the movement party ; — they were denied Christian fellowship, and got a bad name, which they keep even now. I am told that they are still called “ Infidels ” by the Trinitarian leaders, and that, you know, gentlemen, is a term of great reproach in the theological world. It has been asserted, I think, in some Orthodox journal, that the lamented Dr. Channing, whose name is now perhaps praised by your association oftener than his example is followed, undoubtedly went to hell for his sin in denying that Jesus of Nazareth was the infinite God. Gentlemen, these things happened not a great many years ago. I do not wonder at the treatment the Unitarians have received, and still receive, where they are not numerous and powerful, for the Trinitarians maintain that no one can be

saved without a belief in certain doctrines of their Theology, which very doctrines the Unitarians stoutly denied, and in public too. The Orthodox were consistent in what the Unitarians then regarded as persecution, and, I doubt not, would have used the old arguments, Fagots and the Axe — had not the laws of the land rendered it quite impossible to resort to this ultimate standard of theological appeal, which had been a favorite with many of the clergy for more than fourteen centuries. The Unitarians complained of that treatment as not altogether Christian.

But now, Gentlemen, it seems to me that some of you are pursuing the same course you once complained of, and if I rightly apprehend the Theology of your learned body — of which however I am not quite sure — without the same consistency, having no warrant therefor in your theological system. I say nothing of your motives in all this; nothing of the spirit in which some of you have acted. That matter is beyond my reach; to your own master you stand or fall. In 1841 I preached a sermon at South Boston, at an Ordination. That was soon attacked by the Rev. Mr. Fairchild, and numerous other clergymen, of several denominations, equally zealous for the Christian faith. Since that time most of you have refused me the ministerial courtesies commonly shown to the ministers of the same denomination. And yet, gentlemen, I think these courtesies are not, in all denominations, withheld when one of the parties has a moral reputation that is at least ambiguous. Only five of your number I believe have since exchanged with me, though comparatively but few members of other Unitarian associations

have departed from their former course. I do not complain of this ; — I simply state the fact.

Now Gentlemen, there is one matter on which you will allow me to pause a moment. The Benevolent Fraternity of Churches is, I suppose virtually, though not formally, under the direction of certain members of your association. Now that Fraternity has virtually expelled from his office a minister engaged in a noble and Christian work, and performing that work with rare ability and success. You have thus expelled him from his place, simply because he extended ministerial fellowship to me in common with ministers of several other denominations. The case of Mr. Sargent is peculiar, and I must dwell a moment on a few particulars respecting it. If I rightly remember, his family contributed largely to the erection and embellishment of the Chapel out of which he is expelled. He has himself spent freely his own property for the Poor under his charge, and has been untiring in his labors. No shadow of reproach attaches to his name. He is above suspicion of immorality ; but on the contrary, is distinguished beyond his fellows by the excellence of his character, and the nobleness of his life. A righteous and a self-denying man, he went out into the lanes and highways of Boston gathering together the poor and the forsaken, and formed a society which prospered under his ministry, and became strongly attached to him. And yet, Gentlemen, some of you have seen fit, knowing all these circumstances, by demanding of him a pledge that he would never exchange with me — to drive away from the field of his labors and the arms of his parish this noble man — solely, be-

cause he extended the usual ministerial fellowship to me, and yet I still continue a member of your association ! I think he has never been accused, perhaps not suspected, of preaching in his pulpit, or even believing in his study, the peculiar doctrines of my own Theology, which are so obnoxious to some of you, and apparently reckoned worse than a grave moral offence. It may be said that Mr. Sargent was minister over a *Vassal-church* and the Fraternity were his *Feudal superiors*, and this seems to be true. You will say, furthermore, that the Boston Association as a whole, is not responsible for the acts of the Fraternity, and this is doubtless the case, but as I think some of its members are accountable, to them let the above remarks apply. I pass to another matter.

The Unitarians have no recognized and public Creed. It used to be their glory. At the Theological School in Cambridge, I subscribed no Symbolical Books ; at my ordination I assented to no form of doctrines — neither Church nor Council requesting it. When I became a member of your learned body, no one asked me of my opinions, whether orthodox or heterodox. No one even demanded a promise that I should never change an opinion, or discover a new truth ! I know well, Gentlemen, that I differ, and that very widely from the systems of Theology which are taught, and from the Philosophy which underlies those systems. I have no wish to disguise my Theology, nor shelter it beneath the authority of your association. Let it stand or fall by itself. But still, I do not know that I have transgressed the limits of Unitarianism, for I do not know what those limits are. It is a great

glory to a liberal association to have no Symbolical Books, but a great inconvenience that a sect becoming exclusive should not declare its Creed. I cannot utter the *Shibboleth* of a party till I first hear it pronounced in the orthodox way. I shall presently proceed to beg you to point out the limits of scientific freedom, and tell the *maximum* of theological belief which distinguishes you from the "Orthodox" on the one side, and the *minimum* thereof, which distinguishes you from the "Infidels" on the other side.

Gentlemen, you refuse me fellowship; you discuss the question whether you shall expel me from your association, and you actually, though indirectly, prohibit me, as I understand it, from preaching "the great and Thursday Lecture." Gentlemen, I wish to know distinctly the ground you take in this matter. It is not altogether plain why you put yourselves in your peculiar attitude towards me. Mr. Sargent is expelled for granting me ministerial fellowship. He was an accessory after the fact in my alleged heresies — and being but a Vassal of the Fraternity, and therefore within their power, is punished while the Principal of the mischief is allowed to go unscathed, and other clergymen who exchange with me, but have no feudal lords, retain their places as before. Here the issue is obvious, and Mr. Sargent is expelled from his pulpit for *Positive Mispri-son of Heresy*, if I may make use of such a term. Of course the same decree excludes him from his pulpit and the association. But I am told that Mr. Pierpont was quite as effectually excluded from the actual fellowship of your association, as even myself; for while three of the city members of your associa-

tion have continued to extend ministerial fellowship to me — Mr. Pierpont, Mr. Sargent, and Mr. Clarke, — only three, — Mr. Gannett, Mr. Sargent and Mr. Waterston — if I am rightly informed, have actually extended that fellowship to him since the time of the famed Hollis-Street Council, though Messrs. Clarke and Bartol have offered exchanges ! Yet I think he is guilty of no heresy, — *theological* and *speculative* heresy I mean, for in practical affairs it is well known that his course is the opposite of that pursued by most of his brethren in the city.

Still more, at a conference I had with the association, a little more than two years ago, the Chairman of the association — the Rev. Dr. Parkman, — declared that my main offence was not my theological heresies, they would have been forgiven and forgot, had it not been for an article I published on the Hollis-Street Council (printed in the Dial for Oct. 1842,) in which, as he alleged, I “poured scorn and contempt upon the Brethren.” Yet others charge me with heresies, and on account thereof I am told, actually deny my right to Christian fellowship from them, and even my title to the Christian name.

In this intricate confusion, Gentlemen, you will probably see the necessity of saying a word to put all things in a fair light, that I may know on what point you and I are really at issue. Notwithstanding the remarks of the Rev. Dr. Parkman, I am still inclined to the belief that the charge of heresy is the main charge, and as you have had the field of controversy entirely to yourselves these several years, and as yet have not, as a body, made a public and authorized statement of your theological belief, I must beg you to inform me what is ORTHODOXY according

to the Boston Association. The Orthodoxy of the Catholic Church I know very well ; I am not wholly ignorant of what is called Orthodox by the Lutheran and Calvinistic churches ; but the ORTHODOXY of the Boston Association of Congregational Ministers is not a thing so easy to come at. As I try to comprehend it, I feel I am looking at something dim and undefined. It changes color, and it changes shape ; now it seems a mountain ; then it appears like a cloud. You will excuse me, Gentlemen, — but, though I have been more than seven years a member of your reverend body, I do not altogether comprehend your Theology — nor know what is Orthodox. You will do a great service, if you will publish your Symbolical Books, and let the world know what is the true doctrine according to the Boston Association of Congregational Ministers.

I have defined my own position as well as I could, and will presently beg you to reply distinctly, categorically and unequivocally to the following questions. Gentlemen, you are theologians ; men of leisure and learning ; mighty in the Scriptures. Some of you have grown grey in teaching the world ; most of you, I think, make no scruple of passing judgment, public and private, on my opinions and myself. It is therefore to be supposed that you have examined things at large, and been curious in particulars ; have searched into the mysteries of things, deciding what is true, what false, what Christian, and what not, and so have determined on a standard of doctrines, which is to you well known, accessible and acknowledged by all. Some of you can sling stones at a hair's breadth in the arena of Theology. You are many, and I am standing alone.

Of course I shall take it for granted that you have, each and all, thoroughly, carefully and profoundly examined the matters at issue between us; that you have made up your minds thereon, and are all entirely agreed in your conclusions, and that, on all points; for surely it were not charitable to suppose, without good and sufficient proof, that a body of Christian ministers, — conscientious men, learned and aware of the difficulties of the case, — would censure and virtually condemn one of their number for heresy, unless they had made personal investigation of the whole matter, had themselves agreed on their standard of Orthodoxy, and were quite ready to place that standard before the eyes of the whole people. I beg that this standard of Unitarian Orthodoxy, as it is agreed upon and established by the authority of the Boston Association, may be set before my eyes, and those of the public at the same time, and therefore, Gentlemen, I propose to you the following

QUESTIONS.

CLASS I. — SCHOLASTIC QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE DEFINITION OF TERMS FREQUENTLY USED IN THEOLOGY.

1. What do you mean by the word *Salvation*?
2. What do you mean by a *Miracle*?
3. What do you mean by *Inspiration*?
4. What do you mean by *Revelation*?

CLASS II. — DOGMATIC QUESTIONS RELATING TO CERTAIN DOCTRINES OF THEOLOGY.

5. In questions of Theology, to what shall a man appeal, and what is the criterion whereby he is to

test theological, moral, and religious doctrines ; are there limits to theological inquiry, — and if so, what are those limits ? is Truth to be accepted because it is true, and Right to be followed because it is right, or for some other reason ?

6. What are the conditions of Salvation, both theoretical and practical, and how are they known ?

7. What do you consider the essential doctrines of Christianity ; what moral and religious truth is taught by Christianity, that was wholly unknown to the human race before the time of Christ ? — and is there any doctrine of Christianity, that is not a part also of natural religion ?

8. Do you believe all the books in the Bible, came from the persons to whom they are, in our common version thereof ascribed ? — or what are genuine and canonical Scriptures ?

9. Do you believe that all or any of the authors of the Old Testament were miraculously inspired, so that all or any of their language can properly be called the *Word of God*, and their writings constitute a miraculous revelation ? or are those writings to be judged of, as other writings, by their own merits, and so are to pass for what they are worth ; in short, what is the authority of the Old Testament, and what relation does it bear to man, — that of Master or Servant ?

10. Do you believe the law contained in the Pentateuch, in all parts and particulars, is miraculously inspired or revealed to man ? — or is it, like the laws of Massachusetts, a human work, in whole or in part ?

11. Do you believe the miracles related in the Old Testament, for example, that God appeared in

a human form, spoke in human speech, walked in the garden of Eden, eat and drank ; that he commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac ; and made the verbal declarations so often attributed to Him in the Old Testament ; that Moses spoke with Him “as a man speaketh with his friend ;” that the miracles alleged to have been wrought for the sake of the Hebrews in Egypt, the Red Sea, Arabia, and Palestine, and recorded in the Bible, were actual facts ; that the birth of Isaac, Samson, and Samuel, was miraculous ; that Balaam’s ass spoke the Hebrew words put into his mouth ; that God did miraculously give to Moses and others mentioned in the Old Testament, the commands there ascribed to him ; that the sun stood still as related in the book of Joshua ; that Jonah was swallowed by a large fish, and while within the fish, composed the ode ascribed to him ; and do you believe all the miracles related in the books of Daniel, Job, and elsewhere, in the Old Testament ?

12. Do you believe that any prophet of the Old Testament, solely through a miraculous revelation made to him by God, did distinctly and unequivocally foretell any distant and future event which has since come to pass, and in special that any prophet of the Old Testament, did thereby and in manner aforesaid, distinctly, and unequivocally, foretell the birth, life, sufferings, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, so that Jesus was, in the proper and exclusive sense of the word, the *Messiah* predicted by the prophets, and expected by the Jews ?

13. What do you think is the meaning of the phrase, “Thus saith the Lord,” with its kindred expressions, in the Old Testament ?

14. Do you believe that all or any of the authors of the New Testament were miraculously inspired, so that all or any of their language can properly be called the *Word of God*, and their writings constitute a miraculous revelation, or are those writings to be judged of as other writings, by their own merits, and so are to pass for what they are worth? in short, what is the authority of the New Testament, and what relation does it bear to man — that of Master or Servant?

15. Do you believe the Christian Apostles were miraculously inspired to teach, write, or act, with such a *mode, kind, or degree* of inspiration as is not granted by God, in all time, to other men equally wise, moral, and pious; do you think the apostles were so informed by miraculous inspiration, as never to need the exercise of the common faculties of man, and never to fall into any errors of fact and doctrine, or are we to suppose that the apostles were mistaken in their announcement of the speedy destruction of the world, of the resurrection of the body, &c.?

16. What do you think is the nature of Jesus of Nazareth; — was he *God, man, or a being neither God nor man*, and how does he effect the salvation of mankind; in what sense is he the Saviour, Mediator, and Redeemer?

17. Do you believe that Jesus of Nazareth was miraculously born, as it is related in two of the Gospels, with but one human parent; that he was tempted by the Devil, and transfigured, talking actually with Moses and Elias; that he actually transformed the substance of water into the substance of wine; fed five thousand men with five loaves and

two fishes ; that he walked on the waters ; miraculously stilled a tempest ; sent demons out of men into a herd of swine ; and that he restored to life persons wholly and entirely dead !

18. Do you believe that Jesus had a miraculous and infallible inspiration — different in *kind* or *mode* from that granted to other wise, good, and pious men — informing him to such a degree that he never made a mistake in matters pertaining to Religion, to Theology, to Philosophy, or to any other department of human concern ; and that therefore he teaches with an authority superior to Reason, Conscience, and the Religious Sentiment in the individual man ?

19. Do you believe that it is impossible for God to create a being with the same moral and religious excellence that Jesus had, but also with more and greater intellectual and other faculties, and send him into the world as a man ; or has Jesus exhausted either or both the *capacity of Man*, or the *capability of God* ?

20. Do you believe that from a state of entire and perfect death, Jesus returned to a state of entire and perfect physical life ; that he did all the works, and uttered all the words attributed to him, in the concluding parts of the Gospels, after his resurrection, and was subsequently taken up into heaven, bodily and visibly, as mentioned in the book of Acts ?

21. Do you believe that at the death of Jesus, the earth quaked, the rocks were rent ; that darkness prevailed over the land for three hours ; that the graves were opened, and many bodies of saints that slept, arose and appeared to many ?

22. Do you believe that Jesus, or any of the writers of the New Testament, believed in, and taught the existence of a personal Devil, of angels good or bad, of demons who possessed the bodies of men; and do you, yourselves, believe the existence of a personal Devil, of such angels and demons; in special, do you believe that the angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias, and to the Virgin Mary, and uttered exactly those words ascribed to him in the third Gospel?

23. Do you believe that the writers of the four Gospels, and the book of Acts, never mingled mythical, poetical, or legendary matter in their compositions; that they never made a mistake in a matter of fact; and that they have, in all cases, reported the words and actions of Jesus, with entire and perfect accuracy?

24. Do you believe the miracles related in the book of Acts, — for example, the miraculous inspiration of the apostles at Pentecost; the cures effected by Peter, his vision, his miraculous deliverance from prison “by the angel of the Lord;” the miraculous death of Ananias and Sapphira; the miraculous conversion of Paul; that diseased persons were cured by handkerchiefs and aprons brought to them from Paul; and that he and Stephen actually, and with the bodies’ eye, saw Jesus Christ, an actual object exterior to themselves?

25. Do you believe that Peter in the Acts, correctly explains certain passages of the Old Testament, as referring to Jesus of Nazareth, his sufferings, death and resurrection; that Jesus himself — if the Gospels truly represent his words — in all cases, applies the language of the Old Testament

to himself in its proper and legitimate meaning; was he never mistaken in this matter, or have the passages of the Old Testament many meanings?

26. Do you think that a belief in the miraculous inspiration of all or any of the writers of the Old Testament or New Testament; that a belief in all or any of the miracles therein mentioned; that a belief in the miraculous birth, life, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus; that a belief in his miraculous, universal, and infallible inspiration, is essential to a perfect Christian character, to salvation and acceptance with God, or even to participation in the Christian name? and if so, what doctrine of Morality or Religion really and necessarily rests, in whole or in part, on such a belief?

27. Do you believe that the two ordinances, — Baptism and the Lord's Supper, — are, in themselves, essential, necessary, and of primary importance as ends, valuable for their own sakes, or that they are but *helps* and *means* for the formation of the Christian character, and therefore valuable only so far as they help to form that character?

28. Do you think it wrong or unchristian in another, to abandon and expose what he deems a popular error, or to embrace and proclaim an unpopular truth; do you count yourselves, theoretically, to have attained all religious and theological truth, and to have retained no error in your own Creed, so that it is wholly unnecessary for you, on the one hand, to reëxamine your own opinions, or, on the other, to search further for Light and Truth, or do you think yourselves competent, without such search, or such examination, to pronounce a man an infidel, and no Christian, solely because he be-

believes many things in Theology which you reject, and rejects some things which you believe ?

Gentlemen, you have yourselves constrained me to write this letter. I write to you in this open way, for I wish that the public may understand your opinions as well as my own. I beg you will give your serious attention to the above questions, and return me a public answer, not circuitously, but in a straight-forward manly way, and at your earliest convenience. I have, at various times, as distinctly as possible, set forth my own views, and as you have publicly placed yourselves in a hostile attitude to me ; as some of you have done all in their power to disown me, and as they have done this, partly, on account of my alleged heresies, it is but due to yourselves to open the Gospel according to the Boston Association, give the public an opportunity to take the length and breadth of your standard of Unitarian Orthodoxy, and tell us all what you really think on the points above-mentioned. Then you and I shall know in what we differ ; there will be a clear field before us, and if we are doomed to contend, we shall not fight in the dark. I have invited your learned attention to matters on which it is supposed that you have inquired and made up your minds, and that you are entirely agreed among yourselves, and yet that you differ most widely from me. I have not, however, touched the great philosophical questions which lie at the bottom of all Theology, because I do not understand that you have yourselves raised these questions, or consciously and distinctly joined issue upon them with me. Gentlemen, you are

men of leisure, and I am busied with numerous cares; you are safe in your multitude of council, while I have comparatively none to advise with. But notwithstanding these advantages, so eminently on your side, I have not feared to descend into the arena, and looking only for the truth, to write you this letter. I shall pause, impatient for your reply; and, with hearty wishes for your continued prosperity, your increased usefulness, and growth alike in all Christian virtues, and every manly grace, I remain, Gentlemen,

Your obedient servant,

THEODORE PARKER.

WEST ROXBURY, March 20th, 1845.

